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► To cite this version:

Frédéric Wang. The Relationship between Chinese Learning and Western Learning according to Yan Fu (1854-1921). Knowledge and Society today (Multiple Modernity Project), Sep 2009, LYON, France. pp.47-56. halshs-00674116

HAL Id: halshs-00674116

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00674116>

Submitted on 25 Feb 2012

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The Relationship between Chinese Learning and Western Learning according to Yan Fu (1854-1921)

Frédéric Wang, Inalco, fwang@inalco.fr

During the nineteenth century, translations in Chinese from Western languages were done essentially by missionaries with the help of Chinese collaborators or by some Chinese intellectuals in contact with Japan. For instance, the translation of Henry Wheaton's *Elements of International Law* (1836) as *Wanguo gongfa* 萬國公法 in 1864 by W. A. P. Martin is often regarded as an epoch-making event. But, the main fields of translation remained science and technology. Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854-1921) was the first Chinese translator of the works of Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, Thomas Henry Huxley, Herbert Spencer, and Montesquieu, among others. He wrote many commentaries on these authors and their works in his translation. His three criteria of translation: faithfulness (*xin* 信), comprehensibility (*da* 達), elegance (*ya* 雅), published in the preface of *Tianyan lun* 天演論 (Translation of *Evolution and Ethics* of Huxley, 1898), have become classical ones in the Chinese theory of translation.¹ Before him, Chinese elite had begun to discuss the relationship between *hanxue* 漢學 and *xixue* 西學 commonly rendered as Chinese Learning and Western Learning: the first was considered as “Constitution”, “Foundation” or “Substance” (*ti* 體, “body”), the second one as “Function” or “Practical Application” (*yong* 用). Yan Fu first examined this relationship between *ti* and *yong* in the perspective of political thought taking Freedom as *ti* and Democracy as *yong*. The objective of this paper is to understand how Yan Fu conceives this thesis and to discuss some recent evaluations of Benjamin Schwartz's pioneering work on Yan Fu.² I begin with a presentation of Yan Fu's life and his role in the introduction of European human and social sciences.

Yan Fu was born in 1854 in Fujian province. During his early years, he was immersed in the traditional cultural. As Benjamin Schwartz points out, “in his own individual existence, as a matter of fact, he remains a traditional gentleman no matter how far his ideas on general political and social issues may stray.”³ He encountered Western science, when he was 14 years old, in the English-language section of the Fuzhou Shipyard School, where he studied arithmetic, geometry, algebra, analytical geometry, trigonometry, physics, mechanics, chemistry, geology, astronomy and navigation. In 1877, he travelled to Britain, where he studied seamanship, first at Portsmouth, and then at the Royal Naval College in Greenwich. After returning to China in 1879, he taught at the Fuzhou Shipyard School before moving to the Beiyang Naval Academy in Tianjin created by Li Hongzhang 李鴻章 (1823-1901).⁴ Meanwhile, Yan Fu did not play an important role in the entourage of Li. This is why he also tried since 1885 to pass several times the imperial examinations, but he failed every time. After the Sino-Japanese War (1895), he finally found his voice and became one of the leading Chinese intellectuals. He published in *Zhibao* 直報, a Chinese newspaper founded in Tianjin

¹ C.Y. HSU (trans.), “General Remarks on Translation by Yen Fu (1854-1921)”, *Renditions*, No. 1 (Autumn 1973), p. 4-6.

² Benjamin SCHWARTZ, *In Search of Wealth and Power. Yen Fu and the West*, Harvard University Press, 1964.

³ Benjamin SCHWARTZ, *Op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁴ For Li Hongzhang, see Stanley SPECTOR, *Li Hung-chang and the Huai Army. A study in Nineteenth-Century Chinese Regionalism*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964.

by the German Constantin von Hanneken (1854-1925), some of his most famous essays: “On the Speed of World Change” (*Lun shi bian zhi ji* 論世變之亟), “On the Origin of Strength” (*Yuan qiang* 原強), “On our Salvation” (*Jiuwang jue lun* 救亡決論), and “In Refutation of Han Yu” (*Pi Han* 辟韓). Yan Fu’s political ideas were clearly elaborated in these essays. From 1898 to 1909, he translated theses following major works of Western liberal thought: *Evolution and Ethics* by Thomas H. Huxley as *Tianyan lun* 天演論 (On evolution), *The Study of Sociology* by Herbert Spencer as *Quanxue yuyan* 群學肄言 (A Study of sociology), *The Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith as *Yuanfu* 原富 (On wealth), *On Liberty* by John Start Mill as *Qunji quanjie lun* 群己權界論 (On the boundary between self and group), *A System of Logic* by John Start Mill as *Mule mingxue* 穆勒名學 (Mill’s logic), *The Spirit of the Laws* by Montesquieu as *Fayi* 法意 (The meaning of the laws), *Primer of Logic* by William Stanley Jevons as *Mingxue qianshuo* 名學淺說 (An outline of logic), 1909.

In 1902, Yan Fu became Director of the Bureau of Compilation and Translation of Books. He was nominated for the president of the University of Fudan in 1906 then of the University of Peking after the Xinhai Revolution (1911). The First World War plunged Yan Fu into a profound doubt of Western civilisation and he made a radical return to the Confucian tradition. Since 1913, Yan Fu published some essays where he promoted the lecture of Chinese Classics, on filial piety and loyalty. He took part in the Association of Confucianism (*Kongjiao hui* 孔教會) and supported Yuan Shikai 袁世凱 (1859-1916)’s restoration of imperial system. Yan Fu died in 1921 of an asthma attack.

Since China has been defeated by Britain in the Opium War (1840), Chinese elite realised that in order to defeat the West, and make the country strong, the only solution was to learn from the West. The Qing court thus decided to launch a reform, and began to develop industry and technology. During this period of “self-strengthening”, called also “Yangwu Movement” (*Yangwu yundong* 洋務運動), the makers of modern China, as Zeng Guofan 曾國藩 (1811-1872), Li Hongzhang 李鴻章, understood that changes needed in China would have to go beyond mere technological innovation. But they believed that this should be done within the framework of Chinese cultural tradition. The topic of the “roots” (*ben* 本) and the “branches” (*mo* 末), of the substance (*ti* 體) and the function (*yong* 用) was vehemently discussed by this generation and later by Zhang Zhidong 張之洞 (1837-1909), future governor of Canton, who strongly believed that China could flourish only if the new “branches” of Western methods and ideas were grafted on the “roots” of Chinese culture and tradition. For all of them, the Western Learning was a function or application (*yong*) and the Chinese Learning was a “Constitution” or “Foundation” (*ti*) (*zhongxue weiti, xixue weiyong* 中學為體，西學為用, slogan of Zhang Zhidong). Even Tan Sitong 譚嗣同 (1865-1898), a radical theorist and philosopher of Wuxu Reform (Hundred Days’ Reform, 1898), based the explanation of Western Learning on Chinese Learning. Yan Fu’s view is quite different. According to him, Substance (*ti*) and Function (*yong*) are inseparable both for Chinese Learning and Western Learning. He said:

“Substance (body) and function are two aspects of the same thing. The body of an ox has the function to carry a load; the body of a horse has the function of long-distance racing. I never heard that one took ox’s body and horse’s function. Chinese Learning and Westerns Learning are not homogeneous, just like the difference of the appearance between Chinese and Westerners. We can not force their resemblance. Therefore, Chinese Learning as well as Western Learning owns its

proper Substance and Function. Their division allows their coexistence and a union of two leads to their mutual disappearing.”

體用者，即一物而言之也。有牛之體，則有負重之用；有馬之體，則有致遠之用。未聞以牛為體，以馬為用者也。中西學之為異也，如其種人之面目然，不可強謂似也。故中學有中學之體用，西學有西學之體用，分之則並立，合之則兩亡。⁵

For Yan Fu, Western Learning and Chinese Learning are two parallel fields. One should master both the substance and function of them. Thus, he reproaches explicitly Zhang Zhidong's view which sets up a hierarchy between these two types of learning. Among his essays, we can find a key word: liberty or freedom (*ziyou* 自由) in his comparison between China and the West. In “On the Speed of World Change” (*Lun shi bian zhi ji* 論世變之亟), Yan Fu shows two aspects constituting the vital pulse of wealth and power of the West: in the area of knowledge, the Westerners reject the falseness and respect the truth; in the area of justice, they privilege the public good instead of the private interest. The final reason is that they are free:

“In fact, all sages in ancient Chinese history were afraid of the theory of liberty and therefore never established it as a doctrine. But the Westerners say that because heaven alone produces man and gives birth to all equally, all people are granted liberty in the same way. For this reason, all people and all states enjoy liberty, the only restriction being that they do not harm each other. Those who violate the liberty of others are considered as violating the principles of heaven and betraying the proper conduct of man. To kill or hurt somebody or to steal someone else's property are extreme cases of violating the liberty of others. Therefore, not even the ruler of a country may violate the liberty of a single person; and laws and punishments were established in order to ensure this.”

夫自由一言，真中國歷古聖賢之所深畏，而從未嘗立以為教者也。彼西人之言曰：唯天生民，各具賦畀，得自由者乃為全受。故人人各得自由，國國各得自由，第務令毋相侵損而已。侵人自由者，斯為逆天理，賊人道。其殺人傷人及盜蝕人財物，皆侵人自由之極致也。故侵人自由，雖國君不能，而其刑禁章條，要皆為此設耳。⁶

This is to say that freedom was not included in Chinese tradition or Chinese Learning. The principles of equality and democracy, which are also extolled, are, as it were, corollaries of the principle of freedom. In using the old Chinese substance / function (*ti-yong*) dichotomy to describe the relation of freedom and democracy, Yan Fu says in “On the Origin of Strength” (*Yuan qiang* 原強) that in the modern West, “Freedom is the substance, democracy the function”. Obviously, he wishes a transplantation of this occidental value that he idealizes to Chinese case. In this essay, he refers to Darwin and especially Spencer's social Darwinism. China, for his survival, should adopt the principle of evolution based on the social struggle. China can not only venerate his past, but should face the present and the future as the modern West does. Yan Fu alluded also to Spencer's sociology translated by him as “study of groups” (*qunxue* 群學). At this point, he was influenced by Xunzi 荀子 (~298~235) who states that man's superiority over the beast lies in his ability to form a social group. For Benjamin Schwartz, “Yen Fu's rapturous embrace of Spencer by no means marks a total rupture with

⁵ YAN Fu, “Yu Waijiao bao zhuren shu” 與《外交報》主人書 (Letter to the Editor of the Waijiao bao on Education) (1902), in *Yan Fu ji* 嚴復集, Vol. 3, 1986, pp. 558-559.

⁶ YAN Fu, “Lun shi bian zhi ji” 論世變之亟 (1885), in *Yan Fu ji*, Vol. 1, p. 5. XIONG Yuezhi, “‘Liberty’, ‘Democracy’, ‘President’: The Translation and Usage of Some Political Terms in Late Qing China”, in Michael Lackner, Iwo Amelung and Joachin Kurtz (eds.), *New terms for New Ideas. Western Knowledge and Lexical Change in Late Imperial China*, Leiden: Brill, 2001, p. 72.

Chinese traditional thought on all levels.”⁷ The most radical statement of Yan Fu’s ultimate commitment to democracy is to be found in his essay entitled “In Refutation of Han Yu” (*Pi Han* 辟韓). In this essay, Yan Fu criticized the “Transmission of the Confucian Way” (*daotong* 道統) established by the famous writer of Tang period Han Yu (768-824), who advocated the personal assimilation of Confucian values through the Classics, making them part of one’s life. Yan Fu’s critique of the authoritarianism in imperial China is more vehement than what Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲 (1610-1695) did in his *Mingyi dai fang lu* 明夷待訪錄 (Waiting for the Dawn).⁸ B. Schwartz notes that Yan Fu’s persistent preoccupation with the wealth and power of the state marks a change of paradigm from those who are presumably committed to the “preservation of the faith” (*bao jiao* 保教), or to what Zhang Zhidong referred to as the “essential substance” (*ti*) of the Chinese “Way”: For Yan Fu, the “preservation of the state” (*bao guo* 保國) is more important than the “preservation of the faith”. According to Schwartz, this ideology guided Yan Fu’s enterprise of translation. Thus, Yan Fu makes his personal adoption of Western liberal thought. For example, Yan suggests that “the value of individual liberty lies in its power to advance the wealth and power of the nation-state”. For Schwartz, Yan Fu discovers also some theoretical problems not clarified by the liberal thinkers that he translated. Therefore, the depth of his translation surpasses sometimes this of original writers.

Before Schwartz, the philosopher He Lin 賀麟 (1902-1992), one of the best Chinese specialists of Hegel at his time, said that Yan Fu “was not interested in any truth in the doctrines he translated. He was just using these doctrines as medicine for China’s illness”: “When he translated the texts on the theory of evolution, he emphasized the concepts of ‘the weak are the prey of the strong’ and ‘survival of the fittest’ to warn the Chinese people. He introduced British utilitarianism with the purpose of encouraging the Chinese people to search for wealth and power. As for the former theory, he ignored its biological and embryological aspects. As for the latter, he neglected democratic ideas stressing laissez-faire, tolerance, liberty, and equality, along with ideas about social reform, social welfare, and the practical improvement of living conditions.”⁹

He Lin emphasized the utilitarian aspect of Yan Fu’s translation while Benjamin Schwartz analysed with finesse some distortions made by Yan Fu of essential concepts of Western liberal thought in translating Spencer and Mill. “If liberty of the individual is often treated in Mill as an end in itself, in Yan Fu it becomes a means to the advancement of ‘the people’s virtue and intellect’, and beyond this to the purpose of the state.”¹⁰ Thus Yan Fu was responsible of Chinese misunderstanding of Western liberalism: the sacrifice of individual rights for the benefit of state-nation. This explains why Yan Fu rendered *On Liberty* by John Stuart Mill as *Qunji quanjie lun* (On the boundary between self and group). This point of view, supported by Chang Hao 張灝¹¹, has been recently challenged by many scholars, both Chinese and Western. For scholars like Huang Ko-wu 黃克武, Li Qiang 李強, Wang Hui

⁷ Benjamin SCHWARTZ, *Op. cit.*, p. 52.

⁸ There exists a translation of this work by Theodore de Bary, *Waiting for the Dawn: A Plan for the Prince*, Columbia University Press, 1993.

⁹ Quoted by Ko-wu HUANG, “The Reception of Yan Fu in Twentieth-Century China”, in Cindy Yik-yi Chu, Ricardo K. S. Mak, *China Reconstructs*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003, pp. 32-33.

¹⁰ Benjamin SCHWARTZ, *Op. cit.*, p. 141.

¹¹ CHANG Hao, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis: Search for Order and Meaning, 1890-1911*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.

汪暉¹² etc., there exists an evident continuity between Chinese tradition and Yan Fu's work. Some of them are influenced by the post-colonial studies, and do not share the Max Weber's view in the interpretation of Yan Fu's work by Schwartz. They do not agree with his thesis that the introduction of social Darwinism by Yan Fu is decisive in changing Chinese traditional "culturalism" into nationalism.¹³ For Wang Jian 王健, the return of Yan Fu to Confucius and Mencius "is not a back to the opposite side between Western Learning and Chinese Learning." It reflects Yan Fu's universal concern and his search for a real resource of thinking which could make China more powerful and the world more rational.¹⁴

Li Qiang follows Thomas Metzger's view that the Chinese modern thinkers found the way to realise Confucian ideals via the West. According to Li Qiang, Schwartz not only misunderstands Yan Fu's work, but also misreads Spencer, Mill and Smith. For example, Li Qiang notes that Spencer used only the term of physical energy but not the "famous triad of physical, intellectual, and moral energies", as pretended by Schwartz.¹⁵ For Li Qiang, Yan Fu's "triad" is based essentially on his lecture of the *Daxue* 大學 (Great Learning), one of Confucian canonical *Four Books* (Sishu 四書). Only the term of "physical energy" is probably borrowed from Spencer's social Darwinism.¹⁶ For Li Qiang, Yan Fu and his contemporaries have realised two transitions: 1. They successfully overcame the leading role of the traditional Confucian thought which, even though they belied on it in the latter years of their life. 2. They saw the problems of the model of Western civilisation after embracing it with enthusiasm. Their disillusion leaves us an unresolved question: the search for another outstanding cultural model transcending the dichotomy of China and the West. In rejecting the discontinuity of the thought of Yan Fu with the Confucian tradition, these scholars assume explicitly that the main concern of Yan Fu and the intellectuals of his generation is not only the salvation of China but also the enlightenment of Chinese people, which constitute two aspects of one thing. More implicitly, their point of view coincides with this of new Confucian's: Chinese could work out (are capable of development) science and democracy from Chinese traditional morality and culture.

¹² HUANG Ko-wu, *Ziyou de suoyiran: Yan Fu dui Yuehan Mi'er ziyou sixiang de renshi yu pipan* 自由的所以然：嚴復對約翰彌爾自由思想的認識與批判 (The raison d'être of freedom: Yan Fu's understanding and critique of John Stuart Mill's liberalism), Taipei: Yunchen wenhua shiye gufen youxian gongsi, 1998; Li Qiang, *The Social and Political Thought of Yan Fu*, Ph.D dissertation, University of London, 1993. Thomas Metzger devotes one chapter to Li Qiang in his work entitled *A Cloud Across the Pacific: Essay on the Clash between Chinese and Western Political Theory Today*, Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2005. See Sébastien Billoud, "De l'art de dissiper les nuages. Réflexions à partir de la théorie politique de Thomas A. Metzger", *Études Chinoises*, Vol. XXVI, 2007, p. 191-233; Wang Hui, "Yan Fu de sange shijie" 嚴復的三個世界 (Yan Fu's Three Worlds), in *Xue Ren* 學人 (The Scholar), No. 12, 1997, pp. 29-130.

¹³ WANG Jian, "Yan Fu xianxiang jiedu: jian yu Shi Huaci duihua" 嚴復現象解讀——兼與史華慈對話 (The lecture of the phenomena of Yan Fu: a dialogue with Schwartz), in XU Jilin 許紀霖 & SONG Hong 宋宏 (eds.), *Shi Huaci lun Zhongguo* 史華慈論中國 (Essays on China by Schwartz), Peking: Xinxing chubanshe 新星出版社, 2006, p. 436. The article of Wang Jian was firstly published in *Yuan Dao* 原道 (Original Way), No. 5, 1999.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 448.

¹⁵ Benjamin SCHWARTZ, *Op. cit.*, p. 54.

¹⁶ LI Qiang, "Yan Fu yu Zhongguo jindai sixiang de zhuanxing: jianping Shi Huaci *Xunqiu fuqiang: Yan Fu yu xifang*" 嚴復與中國近代思想的轉型——兼評史華慈《尋求富強：嚴復與西方》(Yan Fu and the transition of modern Chinese thought: a commentary of Schwartz's *In Search of Wealth and Power. Yen Fu and the West*), in XU Jilin 許紀霖 & SONG Hong 宋宏 (ed.), *Op. cit.*, p. 418. Li Qiang's article was firstly published in Liu Guisheng 劉桂生 & al. *Yan Fu sixiang xinlun* 嚴復思想新論 (New Essays on Yan Fu), Peking: Qinghua daxue chubanshe 清華大學出版社, 1999.

For Wang Hui, the case of Yan Fu illustrates that in the early stage of modernity, Chinese intellectuals did not completely turn their back on tradition and hence their affirmation of modernity simultaneously entailed a critique. According to Wang Hui, “History, experience and knowledge are the source from which we can constantly surpass ourselves, but they are also the limits we find difficult to overcome.”¹⁷ We can assert without hesitation that Yan Fu tried to adapt his system of knowledge to the historical context of his time focusing his attention to awakening of the people:

“What are China’s principal troubles? Are they not ignorance, poverty, and weakness? In a nutshell, any method which can overcome this ignorance, cure this poverty, lift us out of this weakness, is desirable. The most urgent of all is the overcoming of ignorance, for our failure to cure poverty and weakness stems from our ignorance. In overcoming our ignorance we must exert our utmost efforts to seek out knowledge. We have no time to ask whether this knowledge is Chinese or Western, whether it is new or old. If one course leads to ignorance and thus to poverty and weakness, even if it originates with our ancestors or it is based on the authority of our rulers and teachers, not to speak of persons of lower order, we must cast it aside. If another course is effective in overcoming ignorance and thus leads us to the cure of poverty and weakness, we must imitate it, even if it proceeds from barbarians and wild beasts, not to speak of persons of a higher order.”

今吾國之所最患者，非愚乎？非貧乎？非弱乎？則徑而言之，凡事之可以瘡此愚、療此貧、起此弱者皆可為。而三者之中，尤以瘡愚為最急。何則？所以使吾日由貧弱之道而不自知者，徒以愚耳。繼自今，凡可以瘡愚者，將竭力盡氣戰手繭足以求之。惟求之能得，不暇問其中若西也，不必計其新若故也。有一道於此，致吾於愚矣，且由愚而得貧弱，雖出於父祖之親，君師之嚴，猶將棄之，等而下焉者無論已。有一道於此，足以瘡愚矣，且由是而療貧起弱焉，雖出於夷狄禽獸，猶將師之，等而上焉者無論已。¹⁸

This stresses again the importance of “intellectual energy” in Yan Fu’s thought. In this passage, the distinction between Chinese Learning and Western Learning, between the present and the past disappears. In some way, here Yan Fu seems to prefigure Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877-1927) who will reject in 1911 all qualifiers of learning (*xue* 學): new or ancient, Chinese or Western, useful or useless (學無新舊也，無中西也，無有用無用也). But Yan Fu remained a theorist. He was seldom involved into political movements in his time: hundred days’ Reform, the Xinhai Revolution, the movement of May 4th 1919... He was a man of contradiction. He attempted to awake the people, but in his translation he used an elegant classical Chinese language of Tongcheng School¹⁹ in the time where other intellectuals promoted the vernacular one. His works were intended to the elite but not to the people. He criticized the imperial examinations, but he passed it three times. All his life was connected to the Western liberalism, but his search of freedom led him finally in the last years of his life to support Yuan Shikai’s restoration. Perhaps we can not use the dichotomy continuity / discontinuity of Chinese tradition and this of Western Learning / Chinese Learning to him, because he was constantly facing these two aspects of one concern: the knowledge.

¹⁷ WANG Hui, “Yan Fu de sange shijie” (Yan Fu’s Three Worlds), 1997. Translation by Viren MURTHY, “Retrieving the Past from the Present: Wang Hui, Yan Fu and the intellectual Discourse of the 1990s”, <http://cosa.uchicago.edu/virenmurphy2.htm>

¹⁸ “Letter to the Editor of the *Waijiao bao* on Education”, *op. cit.*, translation by Benjamin Schwartz, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

¹⁹ The representative of this school was Yan Fu’s mentor: Wu Rulun 吳汝倫 (1840-1903) who prefaced his translation of Huxley’s *Evolution and ethics*.

Yan Fu's writings and translations exercised a considerable influence on his younger contemporaries and on the generation of Chinese intelligentsia and political elite. Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873-1929), Hu Shi 胡適 (1891-1964), Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881-1936), and Mao Zedong 毛澤東 (1893-1976) recognized all their debt by the works of Yan Fu. The latter continues to arouse a vast interest of contemporary Chinese intellectuals. The debate launched by Chinese and Taiwanese scholars around Benjamin Schwartz's pioneering work on Yan Fu is keeping with the general pattern of the theory of modernisation.

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